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DENIS MURPHY

The Indonesian Church

Its low-key approach to non-Christians, the Government and the poor may be just as effective as the more controversial methods of the church in other Asian countries

Indonesia with 155 million people is the fifth largest country in the world after China, India, the Soviet Union and the United States. It has the geographical size and natural resources of Brazil. Along the archipelago that stretches 3,000 miles into the South Pacific from the bottom of the Asian mainland are islands among the most exotic in travel literature—Bali, Borneo, Sumatra, the Spice Islands, New Guinea, whose inhabitants include both the descendants of ancient Hindu-Buddhist traditions and primitive tribespeople who attend Mass in grass skirts and penis sheaths.

It has a unique national philosophy in its Pancasila or five basic principles, a special national pride and the combustibles of many another third-world country: a growing gap between rich and poor, authoritarian government, corruption, death squads, Muslim fundamentalism, oil, controlled elections and media, and a war in East Timor, the geographical heart of the country.

Catholics number four million, about 2.5 percent of the population, which is enough to make them the third largest church in Asia after the Philippines and India. It is a church as promising and complex as the country.

The modern history of the Catholic church began when Portuguese sailors and Europeans arrived on the tiny Spice Islands, now the Moluccas, west of New Guinea. Between his work in India and Japan, Francis Xavier visited the islands, sensing perhaps as he neared their shores "the hint of clove in the air like incense" that an early Portuguese navigator had described for officials in Lisbon. Xavier baptized hundreds.

The Catholic population centers are still in the eastern islands, first evangelized by the Portuguese missionaries. The political and economic centers of the country were to the west in Java, home to the Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim civilizations that preceded Christianity. Despite their poverty and lack of political significance, however, the "Catholic" islands—the Spice and Flores and Timor to the south—have continued to play a dramatic role in the church's history.

Buru, for example, one of the Moluccas, was a Devil's Island for the 150,000 to 200,000 political prisoners suspected of Communism who were jailed after the military takeover of President Sukarno in 1966. Cardinal Justinus Darmojuwono, now retired and working as a parish priest in Semarang, Java, spoke to me of Buru and the sad aftermath of the military coup: "We helped the prisoners as best we could. It was risky but we took the chance. No one but Catholics would help them. They were sent off out of sight to be forgotten and die, like the lepers sent to Molokai, which is further up the ocean, you know. These prisoners together have spent more than one million years in jail. That's an average of 10 years for 100,000 men, though exact figures are hard to get. Their life you could say was 'eternally a tomb.' No one knows how many supposed Communists were killed throughout the country from 1965-1967. Some say half a million. It was said they were Communists, but many were poor farmers or workers who didn't know at all what Communism was. The military thought they could kill Communism. You can kill Communists or those you think are Communists, but you can't kill the desire of poor people for justice and change in their poor lives. The whole thing was a catastrophe for the people."

Flores has provided the church with a rough-and-ready lay missionary movement that Jesuit Father John Dijkstra, who works with the major superiors of religious orders and congregations of men and women, described for me with amused admiration: "Flores is a poor land. The men are among the great wanderers in Indonesia. They leave regularly, but wherever they settle, after a few years they build a chapel and go off looking for a priest to bless it and say Mass. They are not known for their prudish ways: One told me, 'we believe in sinning like hell,' but they are faithful Catholics, and many of the Christian communities in the country began with them."

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Flores also illustrates the strength and flexibility of Indonesian Catholics. When the Dutch came to Indonesia in the 17th century, they banned Catholic priests from Flores and the other islands until the 19th century. The Catholic community on Flores was without a priest for 150 years. The people themselves kept the faith alive as did Japanese Christians in Nagasaki. The rosary was one of the pillars of their religious life. Priests returned in the 19th century to find an active if unusual church. A local congregation of sisters has taken as its special charism "the spirituality of a people who stayed Catholic 150 years without a priest."

During the Japanese occupation in World War II, Tokyo sent a Japanese bishop and three priests to take over the work of the church in Flores. The Japanese found there was a bishop already there and, against their government's wishes, decided to serve the local church as parish priests. This teamwork so impressed a young Japanese navy captain, T. Sato, that he became a Catholic.

Timor, one of the poorest islands in the archipelago, was divided by the colonial powers into western (Dutch) and eastern (Portuguese) spheres of influence. Portugal abandoned East Timor in 1975 after losing interest in its empire when Angola and Mozambique became independent. An East Timor group decided to set up an independent state, but almost immediately after its founding, in December 1975, the Indonesian army invaded. It has remained, despite censure by the United Nations, and the war continues with no end in sight. The army's ferocity and levels of destruction have been compared to that of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. By most estimates, one-third of East Timor's 600,000 people have died since the war began in 1975, either directly from the fighting or from famine and disease exacerbated by the war. Pictures have shown Indonesian soldiers holding the severed heads of East Timor guerrillas as if they were fishing trophies. The guerrillas, or Fretelin, have been as barbaric on occasion.

The war is a major national issue that directly involves the church since the people of East Timor are almost all Catholic. The Timorese Catholic church was fully involved in the Indonesian independence struggle, unlike most of the churches in Asia who sympathized with the colonial powers. There were no prominent Catholics with Mahatma Gandhi, for example, which the Indian church still regrets. The leader of the church in this struggle was Jesuit Bishop Albertus Sugijapranata, who in 1940 became the first Indonesian bishop. He was a good friend of President Sukarno and took care of his family when Sukarno was exiled by the Dutch. Bishop Sugijapranata spoke against foreign domination through the 1940's and 1950's despite criticism from his fellow Dutch priests and bishops. He spoke against economic domination of the third world by the West long before Pope Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (1967) made it a concern of the universal church.

Bishop Sugijapranata died in Holland in 1963, during Vatican II. His body was welcomed in the Jakarta cathedral by President Sukarno, and he was named a national hero and buried with the honorary rank of general in a small military cemetery at the edge of Semarang.

The last frontier for the church and the Indonesian Government has been West Irian, the western half of New Guinea. Portuguese ships must have skirted it on their way to the Spice Islands if they came around Cape Horn, but it was not until this century that outsiders began to stop at this colorful, primitive area. The church has been active there for only a few decades.

Mass on Sunday brings women in grass skirts and men dressed in nothing more than penis sheaths. One morning an older woman, excited or moved by the Spirit, broke into a wild native victory chant and dance to express her faith. Others joined. The church rocked in screams and dance. So much for approved liturgies. One mistress of novices went to visit her novices, who had gone home for a brief visit to their villages. She found one of them stark naked by her family's fire. "Everyone wanted to see her," the father explained to the mistress of novices.

'Visitors say there is no doubt about the people's faith'

Catholics have realistically decided to have a church of catechumens in West Irian where people can worship and live as Christians, but without baptism, since many men have two or more wives and other canonically insoluble problems. Yet visitors say there is no doubt about the people's faith.

Besides its colorful history and variety, the Indonesian church has the institutions of every modern church: universities, social action training and research centers and a variety of journals and newspapers, including Kompas, the country's most respected and largest circulated daily, which is run by Catholic lay people.

A pragmatic, low-key realism appears to be the leitmotif of this church. It is never overtly conservative or radical, imitative or flamboyant. So consistent is its well-tempered moderation that the church is virtually unknown even in Asia. It seems to owe more to sober Dutch missionaries than to the Latin Portuguese.

A contrast between the operational methods of the Philippine and Indonesian bishops' conferences may illustrate this point. The Philippine bishops gather for their meetings every six months, literally without any preparation. They have no prepared position papers to guide discussion, no caucuses or discussion at home among the local priests and laity. When the bishops meet, if the chemistry is right, a theme is agreed upon and a committee commissioned to

write a letter. Then everything is forgotten for six months, since there is no full-time group to work out the day-to-day implications of what was decided. The Indonesian bishops have an excellent staff for all their commissions who carefully prepare for the annual meetings by building on past meetings, thus ensuring continuity between them. The Philippine bishops' statements sometimes make exciting reading but have little effect within the church. Statements by the Indonesian bishops are probably the dullest in Asia, with only the smallest of nuanced changes from year to year, but they sum up the whole church's experience and move it on to the next phase.

'The church's work with the poor goes on quietly throughout the country'

With the exception of West Irian, the Indonesian church is unhurried and methodical. The church, confident that it knows what is best for its situation, shows no sign that it can learn from others and does not seem to care what other countries or regions think. Its bishops are mostly religious, simple and hardworking men who were good parish priests before they became bishops. As a group they radiate moderation, as much as Rembrandt's burghers, yet just when they seem to be pigeonholed, they surprise; for example, they have been the most forthright of all Asian bishops in protesting Rome's decisions on such matters as birth control and the ordination of married men. Many bishops would much prefer to take on their governments than the Roman Curia. I was told by Indonesians that Cardinal Darmojuwono, while in Rome for a visit in 1980, knelt at the feet of Pope John Paul II and begged him to allow the ordination of respected leaders so that the people could have the Eucharist regularly. The Pope was silent, but shortly thereafter he accepted the cardinal's resignation, though at 65 he was relatively young and such resignations are more often than not rejected by the Pope.

Three problem areas have provided the fireworks in the life of the church in Asia: relations with non-Christians, with governments and with the poor. The Indonesian church's position in all three matters illustrates, I think, its low-key moderate realism.

According to Government figures, 90 percent of Indonesia's population is Muslim, making it the largest Muslim nation in the world. There are serious questions about the figures, however, and some researchers say that only 40 percent of the people are actually Muslim in anything more than name. Still, they are the dominant religious force in the country, and they have shared in the worldwide Islamic renaissance of the last 10 years. "We are not Iran or Pakistan," Father W. Hofsteede, a Franciscan working in West Java, told me. "Here everyone will smile at you, but many are quite serious about an Islamic state instead of the secular one we have now." He said that the church sees General Suharto's Government as a buffer against this happening and has leaned over backward to support the Government despite its corruption and poor human rights record.

The church has an interreligious commission and from time to time engages in dialogue with Muslim religious leaders at the highest level. But according to Father Hofsteede, who is a member of the commission, the church is more inclined to do nothing specific about relations with Muslims and let time take care of the problem.

The church is aware, he continued, that Muslims are now as educated and involved in society as any other group in Indonesia and as committed to the present modernization trends in the country. Modernization ultimately calls for a secular state, he said, and it will be accepted by all, eventually, if the church and other minority groups do not provoke Muslims by flaunting their position in society and if there is not a sudden and major breakdown in the country's development. "My advice to the bishops is 'don't do anything,' and you know bishops like to hear that."

According to Archbishop Leo Soekoto of Jakarta, the Indonesian bishops have deliberately chosen not to oppose the Government sharply in public: "We have no wish to cry 'Victory!' for two or three days," he said "and then have everything return to normal. Nothing would happen if we did shout. We have to work with this Government since, more and more, all power is in its hands." In this, the Indonesian bishops differ from the Philippine and Korean churches, in which bishops and others do criticize their governments—and the more public the forum, the better. In Indonesia the church has been silent, for example, on the Indonesian army's invasion and on the ongoing pacification program in East Timor.

The Indonesian church's lack of response to this issue has been criticized in Asia and the West. But the priests, sisters and laity I talked to, with only one exception, think the bishops' public silence is wise. They believe that criticism would do no good and would put an end to the help Catholics are now giving to East Timorese, which by all accounts is substantial. But one Indonesian Jesuit thought the church's silence would come back to haunt it in future years. "Prudence must give way," he said, "when 200,000 people are killed on our borders."

The Indonesian church has criticized publicly but dispassionately both Government corruption and the growing gap between rich and poor. In these matters the church is able to base its case on the Government's published intentions, including the Pancasila, which makes social justice one of the five bases of society, along with belief in one God, democracy, humanity and nationalism.

In Indonesia, the church's work with the poor goes on quietly throughout the country. Most often it is indistin-

guishable from the church's pastoral work, in which building basic Christian communities is stressed. "Social action in Indonesia hasn't provided one good story in five years," an assistant editor of UCAN, a Catholic news agency in Hong Kong told me, comparing Indonesia to India, South Korea and the Philippines, where work with the poor has been the stuff of headlines.

Church social action in Indonesia is not involved with marches, labor unions, land reform or cases of overt exploitation, although exceptions do exist—such as a young priest in Central Java who works with the Y.C.W. Instead, the church helps in the Government's transmigration program, builds houses for the poor, trains sisters to run paramedical programs, organizes cooperatives and trains small businessmen.

In other countries, social action work is divisive in the Catholic community. In Indonesia, this work has the full support of most bishops.

A good example of this social action work is that of American Ursuline sister Carol Keane in Ungaran, Central Java. She runs a center for training village leaders that translates general ideas such as conscientization, social justice and democracy into practical, understandable and non-ideological realities.

"We don't talk about anything in general without illustrating it in their own villages, which the leaders have to map and study before they come to us," Sister Keane told me. "We sit with the leaders and study every aspect of their villages: who owns the land and controls the water; the situation of the markets, wages, diets, sicknesses, child-raising patterns, decision-making processes. Little by little, the trainees see the patterns of injustice or inequality that may exist. We do not lecture people. We don't raise national or ideological issues either."

Most of the discussion in Sister Keane's center is group reflection on the jobs given the trainees, such as vegetable gardening or poultry raising. Their reflections on democracy or leadership are based on the experience of working together, including the personal problems that arise. They analyze this experience to see what democracy and cooperation mean in practice. They also study the actions of those who have shown leadership in the group work to see the strengths and weaknesses of different types of leadership.

Social action workers in India, the Philippines and South Korea would call Sister Keane's work "reformist"—a disparaging word. But who is to judge whether in the last analysis, it is not just as effective as the more controversial style of work of those countries.

Who indeed is to judge? Is the Indonesian church among the wisest of the Asian churches, or is it excessively pragmatic? Much depends on the value placed on common sense and stolid realism. ■

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